

## The Opera House and the Orpheum: Elite and Popular Theater in Early 20th-Century Hawai‘i

HONOLULU HAD TWO MAIN theatrical venues in 1900: the Hawaiian Opera House and the Orpheum Theatre. Local amateur actors and musicians were produced in the two venues, and itinerant theater companies had been making the arduous ocean voyage to perform in Honolulu since the mid-19th century. The Opera House was considered the “elite” venue, and the Orpheum the city’s “popular” play house. The programming and the audiences of the theaters also differed, and in their dissimilarity, paralleled a class distinction that marked other United States houses. Visiting theater companies seem to have been limited to performing at only one or the other venue, an indication of the company’s perceived status. Two of these companies, the Neill Stock Company and the Elleford Company, performed at the Hawaiian Opera House and the Orpheum Theatre respectively between 1900 and 1903, and a comparison of the companies, their plays, and their local reception offers a clear illustration of this dichotomy.

Despite differences in programming and amenities, there must have been considerable audience cross-over between the Opera House and the Orpheum, since only about 1,500 English speakers resided in Honolulu in 1900.<sup>1</sup> With houses of about 1,000 each that booked, almost exclusively, American and other English language companies, the two theaters had to have shared a good percentage of audience to

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be economically viable. The perceived class and cultural division persisted, however, and appears to have mirrored the contemporaneous entertainment dichotomy on mainland United States stages. Superficially, the programming seems to be the generic melodrama of the period. But while spectacle was an element of most melodrama, it was especially appreciated by Orpheum audiences. The Opera House patrons generally preferred more text-driven and sentimental entertainment. Audiences were segregated economically as well as by inclination, with Opera House ticket prices effectively excluding less affluent theater-goers.

Like other institutions and customs, English-speaking entertainment in Hawai'i was patterned on United States and European models. In 1900, Hawai'i was a newly annexed territory of the United States following the civil turbulence that resulted in the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy and the organization of a new republic. Now that the two nations were formally joined, President Abraham Lincoln's 1864 observation of Hawai'i seemed especially prophetic: "Its people are free, and its laws, language, and religion are largely the fruit of our own teaching and example."<sup>2</sup> Though the immigration of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean laborers brought variation to the cosmopolitan population of the islands, educational practices, religion, and commerce had been developed on European models.

The new territory considered itself quite modern, with a rapidly developing agricultural base, newspapers, thriving small businesses, horse racing, literary clubs, band concerts, a telephone system, an iron works, and a new stock exchange.<sup>3</sup> But the capital city of Honolulu, with a population of about 40,000 and many of the amenities of an average city and the added glamour of a cosmopolitan elite, appears to have had rather a small-town atmosphere. Local newspapers and periodicals, lacking timely news of the outside world, printed enthusiastic and copious accounts of "every concert, lecture, sermon, party, entertainment, race or game."<sup>4</sup> Society columns ran daily notices of teas and luncheons attended by leading citizens, and the shipping pages listed the names of prominent passengers.

Geographical isolation contributed to the paucity of timely international news; the mainland United States had telegraph to speed news across the continent, but the remote islands of Hawai'i were accustomed to waiting for steamers and sailing ships to bring the lat-

est dispatches. When King Liholiho and Queen Kamāmalu died of measles while visiting London in July 1824, the news did not reach Hawai'i until March 9, 1825.<sup>5</sup> Ships traveling from San Francisco to Honolulu brought news much more quickly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, though there was still a considerable wait for outside communication.

Hawai'i and especially the capital city of Honolulu did their best, however, to keep abreast of American and European cultural movements and fashions. Newspapers of the period carry advertisements for specialty stores with the latest Paris and New York fashions newly arrived on steamers and sailing vessels, as well as for popular hotels and resorts, department stores, drugstores, and services from real estate brokering to blacksmithing.

Entertainment, too, met all the expectations of a *fin de siècle* American community. Civilized entertainment in any given week might consist of literary and musical society offerings, horse races, balls, lectures, regattas, circuses, or amateur and professional theatricals.<sup>6</sup> Honolulu audiences were remarkably up-to-date in their knowledge of contemporary American theater. Not only did some of the wealthier residents attend plays during trips to the continental United States, the general populace had numerous opportunities to see visiting American theater companies when they regularly played seasons in Honolulu. Many of the plays brought to Honolulu had premiered in New York (or the originals had—late 19th-century and early 20th-century theater producers were sometimes guilty of unauthorized adaptations of previously produced plays).

Local periodicals—*The Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, *The Paradise of the Pacific*, *The Hawaiian Gazette*, *The Hawaiian Star* and *The Evening Bulletin*—paid enthusiastic attention to visiting theater companies and their repertoires. Notices of upcoming performances and seasons, arrival dates (or delays) of companies, and theater rental advertisements ran in many issues, as did reviews and large photographs of companies and leading players. Prominent advertisements appeared in advance of the companies' arrivals, announcing specific productions and listing ticket prices and curtain times.

Honolulu's English-speaking population was quite proud of the range and quality of theater presented in its theaters. The theatrical companies that were booked at the Opera House were considered to

be among the best available, and Honolulu itself a desirable destination for an itinerant troupe. Even the Orpheum was acknowledged as a tolerable venue, albeit for less sophisticated entertainment.<sup>7</sup>

The city, however, had an inferiority complex that revealed itself in newspaper columns protesting a perceived negative image. A *Paradise of the Pacific* article reprinted in the *Advertiser* rebuked every mainland writer who either never visited the islands or, once there, merely “stops over a steamer or two.” This “tourist” was enamored of the beauty of the land and the natives and bemoaned the fact that “elements of civilization have stepped in to mar this paradise.” There was a defensive resentment of an outsider’s view of Hawai‘i being “a lazy, pleasure-loving people, kept under the heel of the minority, who are represented as money-grabbing missionaries.” The Caucasian minority certainly did not see itself so, and believed that its judicial and cultural sophistication were on par with any modern community. The prosperous elite of Honolulu society, therefore, had a vested interest in maintaining the quality of life in their city.<sup>8</sup>

By this time in Europe and the United States, the concept of the theater building as urban landmark and public monument had taken hold, and the nineteenth century saw opera become a central example of high art. “By the second half of the nineteenth century the opera house had become an obligatory monument for any city anywhere in the world wishing to establish its European-oriented cultural credentials,”<sup>9</sup> and Honolulu, too, had its own opera house.

Built in 1879 at King and Richards Streets for the then extravagant cost of \$40,000 and originally called the New Music Hall (fig. 1), the theater burned in 1895, was rebuilt, renamed the Hawaiian Opera House, and reopened in 1896 (fig. 2). A *Paradise of the Pacific* gave its particulars in an advertisement.

Furnished as completely and handsomely as any modern theatre. Companies playing the Orient or the Australian colonies can stop over at Honolulu, either GOING or COMING, or can arrange for a season between steamers. Lighted by electricity—Seating capacity 1000—Depth of stage 33 feet—Width between fly galleries 36 feet—Gridiron 40 feet—Proscenium opening 27 feet.<sup>10</sup>

While the exterior of the Opera House was plain and boxy, the interior was lush (fig. 3). Photographs of the Opera House furnish-

ings show the rather narrow gilt-paneled proscenium opening flanked by four curtained and front-balustraded boxes (stacked two to a side) facing each other across an orchestra pit. It was well lighted with a ceiling of "twenty-four square panels, each containing a large ornamental boss in stamped steel, and each carrying five incandescent bulbs, arranged one in the center and one at each corner [ . . . ]. The stage has 485 incandescent lamps in all." The auditorium floor was carpeted in thick Turkish carpet to minimize audience noise, and electric ventilating fans circulated the room's air.<sup>11</sup>

Like other monumental theatre and opera houses of the period, the Hawaiian Opera House was located in proximity to important civic buildings; Ali'iolani Hale was next door, and 'Iolani Palace was just across King Street. Its location on a major city thoroughfare was convenient for its mostly monied audience, which tended to arrive by private transportation. An unnamed reporter in Helen Gay Pratt's *Hawai'i, Off-Shore Territory* describes the Boston Lyric Opera Company's opening night audience at the Opera House in 1899:



FIG. 1. Original Honolulu Music Hall, or Opera House, on the corner of King and Richards Streets. Hawaiian Historical Society.

The audience was one that would have done honor to any opera house in the world. Diamonds sparkled and scintillated on every neck, and their rays shone from many a gorgeously dressed coiffure. Gowns of the richest texture, cut in the latest Parisian fashion, dazzled the eye with their splendor [. . .]. It was hardly half-past seven when society began to arrive, and from that time on a stream of carriages was constantly arriving at the main entrance, depositing in rapid succession lovely ladies hidden in capes and wraps and gallant escorts.<sup>12</sup>

To further convenience play-goers, advertisements for Opera House events often had small print like the following in an *Advertiser* listing: "Carriages may be ordered for *Captain Lettarblair* [play title] for 10:30 pm".<sup>13</sup> At least one notice was even more specific: "Doors open at 7:30 p.m.; overture at 8 p.m.; carriages at 10:30."<sup>14</sup> This instruction may have encouraged prompt curtains, since such an illustrious audience should not be inconvenienced. Since hack fares doubled after 11:00 pm, theater-goers without private carriages also had an interest in the curtain falling on time.<sup>15</sup>



FIG. 2. Opera House, Honolulu, ca. 1900. Bishop Museum.

The Opera House audience, as seen in the breathless description of diamonds, gowns, and carriages, reflected the upper reaches of Honolulu society. Performances appear to have been considered events of note, as newspaper society columns would list the notables either planning to attend, or who had appeared at, a certain play or recital. One such listing in the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* said

Society will turn out en masse for the initial production of the Neill company in 'An American Citizen' at the Opera House this evening [...]. Many prominent officials of the present and former governments will be present. In the boxes will be seen Governor Dole and party, Mrs. Wilder and party, Mrs. C.A. Brown and guests. Alexander Young and J.A Kennedy have engaged the loges, while a number of theater parties have been made up for the occasion.<sup>16</sup>

The ticket prices were not low, although the Opera House promised "Popular Prices." Tickets cost \$1.50, \$1.00, 75¢, and 50¢ for general and balcony seating, with the boxes listed at \$12.00, \$10.00, and \$8.00.<sup>17</sup>

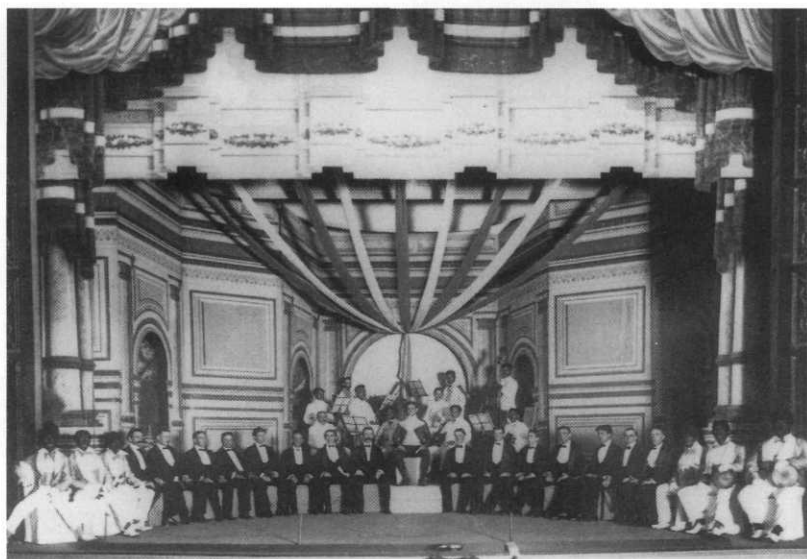


FIG. 3. Elks Club Minstrels seated on stage, early 1900s. Hawaiian Historical Society.

There were, however, people with pockets less deep than those of the Opera House audiences, and these theater-lovers could attend productions at the Orpheum Theater which opened in 1898 on Fort Street. Billed as "Honolulu's Family Play House." in an *Advertiser* article, the Orpheum was located fairly centrally.

Just opposite the Chinese Congregational Church on Fort Street a little above the Central Fire Station is a lane, twelve feet in width, flanked on the mauka side by the new Myrtle Rooming House and, on the makai side by the Sutherland premises. By following up this lane, some fifty-odd feet, there will be found [ . . . ] the site chosen for the Orpheum and it must be admitted that it would be hard to beat in point of location or accessibility.<sup>18</sup>

Accessible by the Fort, Beretania, and Nu'uaniu street tram lines, the new theater was intended to "provide rational evening entertainment, at a trifling cost, to a large portion of this community [ . . . ]. It will be of a simple design, comfort rather than appearance, being the aim of the projectors."<sup>19</sup>

The Orpheum had 1,000 seats in a comfortable, well-ventilated wooden structure with a stage thirty-three feet wide and fourteen feet high. There were no boxes; the better seats seem to have been merely several rows of chairs placed in front of other seats arranged amphitheater style. Orpheum advertisements, like those for the Opera House, boasted "Popular Prices," but admission prices were usually less: 75¢, 50¢, and 25¢.<sup>20</sup>

The Orpheum proprietor, Charles S. Desky, appears to have anticipated some prejudice against the new enterprise and prospective clientele. He announced that a company would only be granted a lease on the condition that

the performances be of a strictly clean and moral character. Any tendency to introduce the coarse and objectionable features of some of the cheap theaters abroad will meet with stern rebuke and immediate cancellation of contracts of players. The prudish, therefore, will have nothing to complain of.<sup>21</sup>

An *Advertiser* article noted the difference between the two houses. The Opera House was admired as "a modern well-equipped theater



in every respect." Immediately following was a reference to "another place of amusement in Honolulu called the Orpheum, which is given over to variety entertainments and companies of the cheaper class."<sup>22</sup> Mr. Desky must have been successful, however, in his efforts to market the Orpheum's good reputation. Recounting her theater attendance of the time, Mrs. Guy Rothwell said that "the Orpheum was quite respectable and matinees were often attended by children and women of the upper class [. . .]." She remembers dressing up somewhat for Orpheum attendance, but it was on the occasions when she visited the Opera House that she was allowed to wear her Sunday-best.<sup>23</sup> The Orpheum had published rules of the house, including:

[. . .] Ushers are not allowed to receive fees; Curtain rises at 8:15 p.m.; See that you get correct change before leaving the window [. . .] No tickets held after 8 p.m. unless paid for in advance; Smoking in the theater strictly prohibited; The audience is requested to remain seated until the final fall of the curtain and not to annoy the people who desire to see the end of the play; Whistling or cat-calling strictly prohibited [. . .] Ladies are requested to remove their hats [. . .] All children that walk must have tickets [. . .] This is a family theater and our aim is to please all classes.<sup>24</sup>

The perception of qualitative differences between the Honolulu theaters echoes assumptions regarding continental United States theaters and their programming. Gerald Boardman describes New York City's Murray Hill Theatre in 1898 as "Manhattan's leading second-string stock house,"<sup>25</sup> but the Olympia Music Hall on Times Square as "a first-class theatre."<sup>26</sup> Boardman also reports that *Lost in New York* (presented by the Ellefords during their 1901 Honolulu season) was called "an example of the sort of third-rate piece that first-class houses [. . .] booked only late in the season to avoid dark weeks."<sup>27</sup>

Variety houses on the continental United States occasionally offered alternative programming, as in Boardman's commentary on New York vaudeville houses: "At intervals many of them briefly abandoned variety to turn their stages over to a farce or newfangled musical."<sup>28</sup>

Honolulu theatres followed the pattern of diversified seasons. Besides opera and theater, other events were also presented at the

Opera House. The Honolulu Symphony Orchestra, a twenty nine-member group founded in 1902, gave its first public performance there on May 2, 1903.<sup>29</sup> Locally produced minstrel shows performed by amateur Caucasian dramatic groups were allowed to perform at the Opera House, and an advertisement appeared in the June 11, 1900 *Advertiser* announcing "Mrs. Gunn's Children's Dance."<sup>30</sup>

The Orpheum also presented entertainment other than theater. The bill was "Dave Barry vs. Jack Weday" in a fifteen round "glove contest" on Jan. 1st, 1904.<sup>31</sup> And later that year, the theater advertised the farewell performance of a curious variety act. A performer called Freear promised to present "the 'Tit'Bits' of his two Frivolity programs including for the first time in Honolulu his Screaming one Man Farce 'Electricity'." The notice promised "Three hours of Roars, Yells, Screams of Laughter guaranteed as before." Audiences were assured that Freear appeared "by universal desire [. . .]. Under the Patronage of the Governor, Prince and Princess Kawanakoa."<sup>32</sup>

Other ethnic groups, including Chinese, Japanese, and Portuguese, had their own amateur and professional entertainment. According to a 1939 article about Honolulu theater at the turn of the century, a Chinese theater production group was formed that erected its own building. Performances took place that "started at four in the afternoon and lasted until midnight."<sup>33</sup> Little notice was taken of ethnic events, however, other than in patronizing newspaper articles. The Japanese and Chinese immigrant population, segregated physically and socially,<sup>34</sup> had their own entertainment. A *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* article, titled "Japanese Show Their Paces in Native Vaudeville," reported that the Japanese Young Men's Club had given a program at their club quarters on Vineyard Street.

The front lanai of the club's cottage had been transformed into a stage, and the front yard turned into an auditorium, surrounded by gay bunting curtains, and with no roof except the spreading branches of a giant algaroba tree, though the leaves of which the moonlight sifted and mingled with the soft light of the pretty Japanese lanterns that were hung on wires running up to the top of a tall pole in the center [. . .]. though the entertainment was not intelligible to the 'haole' mind, it was interesting by reason of its oddity, and was evidently high-class vaudeville to the Japanese audience.

The article lists the different acts, among them: a comic story about drinking saké, a music act with "stringed gourds and tom-toms," a magic act, a drama concerning a mother and her dead child, and a juggler.<sup>35</sup>

Much of the programming of the Opera House and the Orpheum corresponds to two of Brooks McNamara's categories of post-Civil War live popular entertainment: variety entertainment and popular theater.<sup>36</sup> Popular theater included melodrama, spectacle drama, and vaudeville playlets. Variety entertainment consisted of individual acts on a single bill, as in vaudeville, burlesque, and minstrel shows.<sup>37</sup>

A specialized form of variety entertainment immensely popular from the early 1800s well into the 20th century, minstrelsy was evidently quite popular in Honolulu. According to Gary D. Engle, the minstrel show was "that grotesque concoction of song, dance, and theatrical comedy organized around the thick-lipped, wooly-wigged image of the banjo-plunking, blackface minstrel clown."<sup>38</sup> Visiting British and American warships had their own dramatic companies which spent tedious hours at sea rehearsing minstrel shows, plays, or light opera, which they presented when in port.<sup>39</sup> Willard Wilson notes that local papers praised these floating amateur companies, singling out several during the 1870s and 1880s for "high histrionic standards."<sup>40</sup> A local amateur theatrical group, the Healani Minstrels, was of such interest that even their rehearsals were reported in the *Advertiser*<sup>41</sup> and the subsequent extensive review of their Opera House performance was headlined "The Healani Minstrels Give Show of Season."<sup>42</sup> Another local minstrel show presented at the Opera House, this one by the Honolulu Elks Club, was also given favorable press coverage.<sup>43</sup>

At least one African American minstrel company traveled to Honolulu—the extremely popular Ernest Hogan, whose advance press touted "Ernest Hogan and his Funny Folks in A New Conglomeration, 'The Coons' Picnic'."<sup>44</sup> The company's Orpheum engagement was evidently well-received; before they sailed, the company went around Honolulu, serenading the town, and "Among the folks entertained with a musical good-bye were Prince David Kawanakoa, J.C. Cummings, John Colburn and others who had entertained the 'unbleached American' during his stay."<sup>45</sup>

Hogan returned in 1901 with a 21-member company to present a vaudeville bill which included a minstrel show first, with specialties offered afterward, including a contortionist and acrobat (the Carter Brothers, billed as equilibrists), a roller skater, and a comedy sketch team. The November 1901 arrival was noted in the *Advertiser* with approval and anticipation.

All the company seem prosperous and are dressed in the latest Coonville fashions [. . .]. The chances of seats for this performance and the next two or three are getting exceedingly slim, the name of Hogan seeming to have the same magic power draw as heretofore.<sup>46</sup>

The review of Hogan's first night was glowing. Despite Hogan's reported hoarseness, the audience was apparently so pleased with the performance that he was brought back for encore after encore. Two new songs, "Run, Chicken, Run," and "Go Wa-ay back and sit down," were praised as giving Hogan "the opportunity to show his really wonderful method and his more than wonderful features" (a large photograph accompanying the review bears witness to this last comment).<sup>47</sup> For "Ernest Hogan and his Company of Unsurpassed Colored Comedians," the Orpheum raised its ticket prices to \$1, 75¢, and 50¢.<sup>48</sup>

Though variety and minstrel shows were well-attended, it was melodrama, the favored form of theater in the 19th century, that was particularly popular in Honolulu. The style flourished in the United States because, as Daniel Gerould posits, it "is above all a democratic genre of popular art, designed for large mass audiences ignorant of artistic tradition and indiscriminating in matters of culture, but avid for robust entertainment and rudimentary moral instruction."<sup>49</sup> Actors declaimed and gestured, villains were vanquished, heroes and heroines rode triumphantly off into the sunset, if not with eloquence, then certainly with special effects. The popular sensation scenes in which trains threatened victims tied to tracks, avalanches and snowstorms obscured the stage, and fires ravaged tenements became more and more thrilling and technologically complicated. The action in William Gillette's *Ninety Days*, which opened in New York in 1893, was described in *The Times*:

An Atlantic liner strikes an iceberg, and as the bow of the ship slides upon the berg the rear of the stage rises in the air and the whole struc-

ture trembles and heaves in a very realistic manner. Lifeboats are launched, the berg goes careening by, and the scene is full of thrilling action. Again a party on the berg is besieged by a polar bear, but part of the berg is made to split off and float away, carrying bear and villain.<sup>50</sup>

By the turn of the century, however, the form had started to evolve, depending less on crude stereotype and sentimentality, and more on linear plot structure as opposed to an episodic form. Violence and spectacle were limited to act endings, and realistic situations and serious themes dominated. Actors were given colloquial regional American speech instead of their former grandiloquent dialogue. The older style persisted, however, and

between 1900 and 1910 there was a complete separation effected between serious middle-class melodrama and the cheap proletarian variety—known as ‘10, 20, 30’ because of its low-priced tickets—which became an independent industry with its own repertory [. . .] companies, and theatres (in the Bowery as well as in the provinces).<sup>51</sup>

Regardless of type, melodrama was the reigning theatrical form of the United States, with numerous touring companies performing across the nation, and it was equally dominant in Hawai‘i. The Opera House appears to have booked well-known companies, among them the Neill Stock Company. The Neill Company was a popular theatrical company that toured the United States and Hawai‘i from 1894 to 1904. James F. Neill, the manager and founder, dubbed “Father of the Modern Stock Company” by the *Toledo Blade* in 1907, is said to have maintained a high standard which resulted in the company’s popularity from Ohio to California. Unusual for an actor/manager of the period, Neill was one of the few whose company featured leading actors other than himself. He is also credited with being the first to present Saturday morning performances and the first to “offer ‘professional’ matinees for the secretarial staffs of business firms.”<sup>52</sup> The Neill company of actors was also relatively constant; this stability is attributed to James Neill’s leadership. “He maintained strict discipline and emphasized traditional theatre ethics, but his company respected him and tended to stay with him for several seasons. In fact, the roster of company principals changed little during the decade of the company’s heyday.”<sup>53</sup>

The Neills' first tour to Honolulu in 1900 was publicized as "Mr. James Neill And the Incomparable Neill Company Presenting an Extraordinary Repertoire of High-Class Successes. Lavish Scenic Mountings".<sup>54</sup> The review of its first performance, *An American Citizen* by Madeleine Lucette Ryley, was headlined, "A Promise Well Kept," evidently referring to the Opera House audience's high expectations.<sup>55</sup> An article directly below the very favorable review was titled, "A Fashionable Audience: Honolulu Turned Out Generously to Greet the Players." It goes on to list the society leaders in attendance, including Governor and Mrs. Dole, Mrs. Wilder and friends, and the Hon. Alexander Young, and closes by complimenting the audience for a positive influence on the actors. "The toilettes of the ladies were especially appropriate and added much to the success of the play, as the effect of such a fashionably dressed audience upon the players made them exceedingly anxious to please. Many new gowns were noticed."<sup>56</sup>

Neill himself seems to have been of particular interest to Honolulu residents, as several human interest stories about him ran in the *Advertiser*. One such article notes that Neill had just purchased a number of rare prints from an English antiquarian. Neill's musings on the differences between his specialized taste and the indiscriminate purchases of the nouveau riche, and descriptions of his library are evidently cited to define him as a gentleman of taste and breeding.<sup>57</sup> Another article, with a large etching of a solemn Neill in formal dress, describes him as "A student and a stage director of rare discrimination, a lover of that which is educating and enobling, and a polished and refined gentleman in private life."<sup>58</sup>

Curiosity about the Neills extended to their private lives. A June 26, 1900 *Advertiser* article reported that the Neills and Mr. George Green-sweig of San Francisco had met for dinner. The article has an air of general approval of gentlefolk enjoying themselves in a civilized manner and even listed the evening's menu.<sup>59</sup> Another *Advertiser* article, subheaded "Actor a Philanthropist," recounts a story about Neill and a prop chop (whether lamb or pork is not mentioned) stolen from backstage by "a forlorn, ragged, bare-footed darkey of about eight years old." Neill allegedly sent out to a restaurant and made the boy eat as much as he could hold as punishment for the theft, then gave

him the rest of the feast to take home. This incident was seen as both a great joke and an example of the actor's magnanimity.<sup>60</sup>

A society column in a 1901 *Advertiser* shows that the Neills had lost none of their appeal on the second tour. The opening night audience that year included the governor and attorney general in one box, and Prince David and Prince and Princess Kalaniana'ole in another, while the loges and orchestra were filled with society names.<sup>61</sup> Society attended the theater, and the theater accommodated society. For a Neill production of *The District Attorney*, the Thanksgiving night curtain was held until 9 p.m., giving audiences time to finish their dinners.<sup>62</sup>

Other performances that season seem to have been quite well-attended, with reviews such as the following marveling over the excellent ticket sales:

Thursday evening, and a packed house! This is about the worst night in the week for audiences. Many a good company has played to hundreds of empty seats in the middle of the week. Not so the Neills. The house last night was composed of Honolulu's best people. It was a dressy audience.<sup>63</sup>

The Neill Company's first season is credited with paving the way for the rest of the American theater companies that would visit Honolulu over the next several years. Their financial success and favorable reception were alleged to be a revelation to mainland United States theatrical managers and an incentive to book other theater companies for either stop-over performances or complete seasons in Honolulu.<sup>64</sup>

According to Neill, conditions in Honolulu were, however, slightly different from those in theaters on the continental United States. Common theater practice there, he said, was for a theater to share gross receipts with a company. The Opera House, however, seems to have operated differently, with a company required to rent the building and hire all the support personnel, from stage hands to ushers. He also noted that the visiting company performed only four times a week, since busy society theater-goers had other obligations and interests on the dark nights.<sup>65</sup>

While the Neill Company was accepted into society despite their

theatrical background, the Elleford Company, performing at the Orpheum, was given a different reception. A summer season preview article included an announcement of their arrival, and compared to the plaudits showered on the Neills, the Elleford commentary seems faint praise.

The company has been brought here by a hui of young business men who think there is an opening in Honolulu for the class of plays presented by the Ellefords at popular prices [. . .]. It is not claimed by the impresarios that the Elleford's (sic) are a 'first-class' company, but that they give a first-class performance with actors who are all 'responsible.'

On the plus side, however, the article bemoaned the lack of decent scenery at the Orpheum and was enthusiastic about the fact that the Ellefords were to bring "a complete stock" of their own to enhance their repertoire of thirty plays. The article concluded with the belief that "melodrama and the broader lines of comedy, filled in with plenty or (sic) specialties [songs, dances, and sketches performed between acts and after the play, usually having little to do with the plot], will touch the popular pulse."<sup>66</sup>

Another point in favor of the Ellefords was that they came with a company of fourteen which had been together for the past four years. Companies often traveled with only principal players and made up the rest of the casts with local amateurs.<sup>67</sup> That the Ellefords would not need to rehearse their combined casts between performances was apparently rare.<sup>68</sup> Yet another preview article mentions that the company comes highly recommended for acting, scenery, and costumes. Honolulu was alleged to be yearning for "a hearty laugh and the thrill of a genuine melodramatic situation."<sup>69</sup>

Several days later, yet another pre-opening article mentioned the company's private scenery, saying that "The Ellefords guarantee not to use a piece of the Orpheum stock scenery, a fact which alone, will endear them to the public." Oddly, it also praised the company's humility:

This is the first time that a dramatic company, enjoying a good Coast reputation, but not playing the first-class theaters of the big cities, has had the courage to say so, and has visited Honolulu without claiming



that they were absolutely the finest, meanwhile asking a first-class price [. . .] and no one will object to paying 75 cents to witness a fairly good performance of a popular play.<sup>70</sup>

The Elleford's first night, a six act presentation of *Quo Vadis*, promised Rome burning and an arena scene. The *Advertiser* review was complimentary, calling the performance a success, though it was mentioned that "comedy and the higher drama is probably the forte of the organization."<sup>71</sup>

In contrast to the media reception granted the Neill Company, there does not seem to have been much society notice taken of the Ellefords, though several cast members did have pictures published in the newspapers. One young Elleford actress, billed as "Baby" Lillian and coyly posed in a large photograph, was given a short article in the *Advertiser*. She was noted as "perhaps the cleverest child artiste, in a legitimate way, that has ever appeared in these Islands. Only seven years old, she shows decided dramatic ability, combined with a naturalness that is too often missing from the efforts of infant prodigies." Baby Lillian and her sister "Little" Evelyn were to appear at a reception for Honolulu children following a matinee performance.<sup>72</sup> However, there were few other mentions of the company besides reviews.

The Ellefords' extra-theatrical activities were not entirely disregarded. An article announced that the company would hold an on-stage reception following that afternoon's benefit performance in aid of a Home for Consumptive Actors, offering tea and cake to audience members. It was advertised as a rare opportunity to meet the actors face to face "surrounded by the glamour of the play."<sup>73</sup>

Differences in the companies' repertoires may account for the difference in the tone of their Honolulu reviews and the companies' social appeal. The Neills' society popularity could have been due not only to the glamour of their national reputation, but to a more sophisticated repertoire. For example, the Neills included two of Oscar Wilde's plays, *Lady Windemere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*, in their Honolulu seasons. These pieces are rather better written than the majority of the period's plays and, while they include characteristics of the society plays popular with Opera House audiences, such as upper class characters compromised, rescued, and redeemed, they contain greater subtlety and depth than the usual melodramatic fare

of the period. Certainly the *Advertiser* review of *An Ideal Husband* recognized this:

It is in this style of play that the Neill Company are at their best. With tasteful settings, handsome costuming and excellent acting, the play last night was most enjoyable [. . .]. the language is so sparkling that one wishes, and needs, to read the play after seeing it acted to thoroughly enjoy it.<sup>74</sup>

As for the production of *Lady Windemere's Fan*, the *Advertiser* said, "The play is not for children. All grown folk cannot grasp it. It appeals to those who have walked in life some years; those who have lived, loved and suffered. A more moral play has not been written for grown-up people."<sup>75</sup>

Another of the Neill productions was also praised for its literary merit. *The Case of Rebellious Susan* is a comedy about a young Mayfair woman who, upon finding that her husband has been unfaithful, pretends to pay him back in kind, thus winning him back. Morally redeeming, at least for the female characters, with a touch of titillating raciness, the play was rated "admirable in continuity and language and one of the prizes of the repertoire."<sup>76</sup>

Reviews of the Ellefords, while enthusiastic, continued the back-handed compliments of the preview articles. "While none of the performers of last night are great actors, nor pretend to be, they have so far exhibited versatility and their ability to agreeably and clearly interpret the plays that they have produced."<sup>77</sup> Some condescension towards both the company and the Orpheum audience is also detectable in an *Advertiser* review of the Ellefords' *The Black Flag*:

"The plot is that of a typical melodrama and seems to be emphatically the kind of entertainment that suits an Orpheum audience [. . .]. the plays selected for next week are largely of the same type, strong melodrama with plenty of comedy to relieve the heavier situations."<sup>78</sup>

Favorable notice, however, was again taken of the Ellefords' scenery and effects. A 1901 review of their production of *The Fatal Card* was detailed in its praise. "Special scenery was used last evening, the prologue drop curtain, with its lighted mines and houses, and the train running through the gorge below, being particularly effective."<sup>79</sup>

The *Advertiser* was complimentary towards *The Galley Slave* as well: "The scenery was excellently handled, the first act, a street in Venice, being staged very prettily and realistically, with a curtain of true Italian coloring and an effective appearance of an illuminated gondola."<sup>80</sup> The spectacular final offering of the Ellefords' 1901 season was *Lost in New York*, and it "presents a series of sensations that would thrill the most callous playgoer. There is a blackmailers' den, a wharf with a real boat, a wild escape from a lunatic asylum, a timely escape down a telegraph pole."<sup>81</sup>

The Civil War play was a staple of American melodramatists of the 1880s and 1890s,<sup>82</sup> and the Ellefords had at least two in their repertoire. Both used the war as backdrop to the main theme of romance and star-crossed lovers. Their 1901 production, *The Blue and the Gray*, was a story of a Louisiana girl who falls in love with a New England boy. The pair eventually surmount all parental objections when her father dies and live happily ever after with her inheritance, with which she rescues her destitute lover and his mother.<sup>83</sup>

In 1903, they produced *Shenandoah*, a Civil War play with two love stories. In this play, two West Point friends from opposite sides fall in love with each other's sister. The war again was merely backdrop, with apparently no arguments about slavery or secession in the play, nor did actual fighting take place on stage where battle noises, uniforms, and bugle calls supply most of the atmosphere.<sup>84</sup> The *Star* noted that the play's author, Bronson Howard, had seen the Elleford production in San Diego and been impressed by the sincerity and earnestness of the performance.<sup>85</sup> The play was a success for the Ellefords in Honolulu, earning "frequent rounds of applause and curtain calls."<sup>86</sup>

The general impression garnered from newspaper articles and reviews is that an Elleford play was great fun, with excitement and thrills guaranteed, and that the scenery was of paramount importance. A 1903 *Advertiser* article announced that the Ellefords were returning to Honolulu on the S.S. Alameda

with all the paraphernalia for their forthcoming season. They carry many hundred pounds overweight in special scenery above their usual requirements as Elleford does not believe in using local scenery that the play-goers have got tired of gazing at until they know every spot and scratch upon it. This information should be a relief to Orpheum frequenters.<sup>87</sup>

The 1903 season lived up to its advertising. A scene in *Blue Jeans* took place in “a saw mill in full blast with practical machinery as demonstrated by the ripping of two planks in full sight of the audience.” In action that might be considered somewhat subversive of traditional melodramatic form, the heroine saves the hero after he is thrown onto the slide by a villain.<sup>88</sup> Equally exciting were scenes in *Kidnapped*, with “a burning cellar, an abduction in a regulation hack, and a sensational murder and other exciting scenes.”<sup>89</sup>

Spectacle and scenery were perhaps not as much a priority at the Opera House, but the Neills seem to have calculated their audience nicely during their first visit. A complimentary review of *A Bachelor's Romance* said that, “some climaxes are just strong enough to thrill without too common jarring.”<sup>90</sup> During their 1901 season, the Neills included a note in advertising a week's playbill: “Friday, November 29, the scenery and stage settings will be put in place in full view of the audience.” Presumably this activity was sufficiently unique to warrant special notice.<sup>91</sup>

In that second season, however, they appear to have misjudged when they included *Under Two Flags* in the repertoire. Given James Neill's reputation for acquiring and presenting recent New York plays,<sup>92</sup> the company may have used the version that was the hit of the 1901 New York season, “condemned as errant claptrap” but a commercial success.<sup>93</sup> The novel and its many adaptations concern a wrongfully disinherited young man who, when scorned by his fiancée, runs away to join the French Foreign Legion where he falls in love with a camp follower. The play has Bedouins, fight scenes, duels, sand storms, the camp follower's tragic death, and a horse.<sup>94</sup> Reading only the Honolulu review's headline might lead one to believe that the critic's opinion was favorable: “Under Two Flags Pleased the Gods—Melodramatic Performance of Ouida's Novel Brings Down the Gallery.” The gallery, however, referred to the far reaches of the balcony, and the gods were those in the cheap seats. The behavior of “gallery gods” was notorious. Boardman cites an example of balcony patrons' misbehavior in an 1878 New York production so bad that it

caused even otherwise decorous playgoers to drop their reserve and to join the gallery gods and well-heeled undergraduates in hooting, waving handkerchiefs, pelting the stage with food remnants, and generally

creating such mayhem that critics reported the production onstage seemed to be acted out in dumbshow [. . .].<sup>95</sup>

The Honolulu reviewer was unsparing of criticism.

There were many in the house on Saturday night, principally upstairs, who [. . .] reveled in the one, two, three, four, over the table and round the chair, sabre, dagger, and scabbard, free for all fight in the third act. There has to be, I suppose, one gallery play in every repertoire company, but the Neills were unfortunate when they selected "Under Two Flags." The dramatization of the novel used by them is a bad one. [. . .] The scrambling, base-running finish of the first act with every character scampering for home, is to say the least of it amateurish. [. . .] After the class of plays that the Neills have been giving us so artistically and have got yet to give us this season, why "Under Two Flags?" The company is as ill at ease in such a production as a Bowery stock company would be in "A Social Highwayman."

Even the local polo pony cast as the heroine's horse balked and attempted to get off the stage, perhaps as a commentary on the production. The reviewer did admit that the audience enjoyed the show, though it is unclear whether this includes the boxes and loges as well as the gallery.<sup>96</sup>

The Orpheum gallery audience, on the other hand, was not so slighted. The second play of the Ellefords' first season, *The American Girl*, had a full orchestra, but fewer in the gallery. The *Advertiser* review seemed sanguine that "the boys" would come around. After all, the gallery patrons were the ones who "used to turn out en masse to see Hogan [the African-American minstrel player]," and they would surely appreciate the Ellefords' "great little show."<sup>97</sup> A contemporary reader could infer that an Elleford show was a gallery show, as opposed to plays in the Neill repertoire that seldom appealed to the baser tastes of the gallery audience.

Honolulu desired outside entertainment but evidently did not always support it. An *Advertiser* article pleaded for the audience to support the theater artists who visited Honolulu. It stated unequivocally that Honolulu audiences deserved the best in entertainment, but admonished them to turn out for it. Ticket sales were tied to quality of performance, and the paper was gratified to note that Frederick

Warde, a well-known American actor, had had a much more monetarily successful season than "a lesser star who came with meretricious plays [. . .]." <sup>98</sup>

It took remarkable effort for theatrical companies to travel all the way to the Hawaiian Islands to perform, bringing companies, scenery, and costumes with them. The seasons were not always profitable even for the more highly-regarded companies: the 1903 Neill season was financially unsuccessful, regardless of critical praise.<sup>99</sup> Actors and managers complained about Honolulu audiences, saying they were "too exacting, wanting twelve new plays in a four weeks' season and only turning out three nights a week."<sup>100</sup>

Opera House society patrons, excepting, perhaps, the gallery boys, expected, and received, seasons whose comedies prompted polite laughter rather than guffaws and tragedy that tugged at the heart without descending to the vulgar. The Orpheum audiences seem to have wanted less subtle fare, rife with spectacle, thrills, and pathos. Emulating their counterparts on the continental United States, Honolulu's English-speaking theaters accommodated both tastes. Theatrical entertainment would flourish throughout 20th-century Honolulu, though the Opera House and the Orpheum would not. Renovated in 1906, the Orpheum continued to feature theater, vaudeville, minstrel shows, and later, moving pictures. It burned on April 28, 1910 and was not rebuilt. The Opera House presented touring theatrical and musical entertainment as well as local amateurs until it was razed in 1917. There is no indication that programming changed substantively in either the Orpheum or the Opera House. Until their demise, the theaters and the companies that played them delivered, for the most part, precisely what their audiences desired.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Secord Scott, "The Professional Legitimate Theatre in Honolulu: 1900-1910", master's thesis, Hawai'i, 1953, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph S. Kuykendall and A Grove Day, *Hawaii A History* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1948) 193.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Gay Pratt, *Hawaii: Off-Shore Territory* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944) 40.

<sup>4</sup> Pratt 1.

<sup>5</sup> Kuykendall 48-49.

- <sup>6</sup> Kuykendall 131–137.
- <sup>7</sup> “Honolulu as a Center of Dramatic Interest,” *PCA* 30 May 1901: 14.
- <sup>8</sup> “Hawaii Not a Freak Country,” *PCA* 30 May 1901: 14.
- <sup>9</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Place of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989) 79, 81, 83.
- <sup>10</sup> Hawaiian Opera House. Advertisement. *PP* Dec. 1899: 190.
- <sup>11</sup> “Hawaiian Opera House,” *PP* Dec. 1900: 17–18.
- <sup>12</sup> Pratt 4–5.
- <sup>13</sup> Hawaiian Opera House. Advertisement. *PCA* June 25, 1900: 4.
- <sup>14</sup> Hawaiian Opera House. Advertisement. *PCA* Sept. 20, 1901: 13.
- <sup>15</sup> “Honolulu as a Center of Dramatic Interest,” 14.
- <sup>16</sup> “Society,” *PCA* June 23, 1900: 3.
- <sup>17</sup> Hawaiian Opera House. Advertisement. *PCA* Sept. 20, 1901: 13.
- <sup>18</sup> “The ‘Orpheum’—Honolulu’s Family Play House is Being Built,” *PCA* Nov. 3, 1898: 1.
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- <sup>21</sup> “The ‘Orpheum,’” 1.
- <sup>22</sup> “Honolulu as a Center of Dramatic Interest,” 14
- <sup>23</sup> Qtd. in Scott 35
- <sup>24</sup> “At the Orpheum,” *PCA* Jan. 31, 1899: 3.
- <sup>25</sup> Gerald Boardman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy & Dance, 1869–1914* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1994) 428.
- <sup>26</sup> Boardman 413
- <sup>27</sup> Qtd. in Boardman 270.
- <sup>28</sup> Boardman 207.
- <sup>29</sup> Robert C. Schmitt. “Symphonic Music.” 1994. *HHS*. Dec. 1, 2001 <<http://www.hawaiianhistory.org/symphony.html>>.
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- <sup>31</sup> Glove Contest. Advertisement. *HS* Dec. 29, 1903: 5.
- <sup>32</sup> Orpheum. Advertisement. *HS* Oct. 8, 1903: 5.
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- <sup>34</sup> Pratt 12.
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- 43 "Minstrels Rehearse: Elks Put Finishing Touches on Their Program," *HA* May 4, 1903: 8.
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